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AUTHOR O'Brien, Dominic V.
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ABSTRACT

Critics of higher education complain that universities and broadcast television fail to meet the needs of adult learners. The creation by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1979 of a project in adult learning was an attempt to make both television and educators more responsive to adult learners. However, the result of this project and others similar to it have been a focus on courses, telecourses, and programs. Other services offered by educational institutions such as counseling, assessment, credentialling, and record-keeping, have been largely ignored; the potential of instructional technology has not yet been fulfilled. Instructional technology is too important to be used solely for instruction: it should also be used to offer educational support services, thereby expanding the reach of educational institutions. (DB)

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DEPROGRAMMING THE OPEN UNIVERSITY: EXPANDING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Dominic V. O'Brien

March 1990

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DEPROGRAMMING THE OPEN UNIVERSITY: EXPANDING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Dominic V. O'Brien*

ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on technology and education emphasizes the role of the machine as teacher. The technology exists, we are told, in terms of courses and programs, both broadcast lecture and computer software. That is a legitimate role for technology because it expands the audience and, when done well, adds substance and interest to the lecture. But if we consider the other roles filled by the university in addition to instruction—counseling, assessment, record-keeping—then the potential of technology becomes apparent. This paper will argue that instructional technology is too important to be left to instruction; it will outline ways in which the technology can be used to support these other roles as well.

EXPANDING ROLES FOR TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Adrian Malone, who produced the BBC's The Ascent of Man and The Age of Uncertainty, has observed that "Americans have needs not provided for by the networks" (ref 1). For years, the critics of higher education have registered the same kind of complaint: the universities fail to meet our needs, while we thirst for what they have to offer. The creation by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1979 of a CPB Station-College Executive Project in Adult Learning and PBS's Adult Learning Task Force was a promising attempt to make both television and education more responsive to adult learners. But if those groups have caused any change in policy over the last decade, it has received scant notice.

There is a natural sharing of interests between educators and public broadcasters. My purpose, however, is neither to analyze that relationship nor to suggest ways of making it more gratifying to the various parties. But in terms of service to the public, each can help the other. Television can help expand the reach of educational institutions. At the same time, the university can help public television by reinforcing the notion of education in public broadcasting, by demonstrating that the services to be provided by this quintessentially democratic medium are not limited to the delectation of the highbrow (ref 2).

Some broadcasters have tried to encourage change, and some institutions have responded. But producers and educators do not always hear one another. Nevertheless, the weaknesses in the marriage to date are due not to any basic incompatibility between broadcasters and educators but to a limited view by both parties of what formal educational institutions have to offer. Consider, for example, how often discussions of the uses of public broadcasting are limited to the provision of courses. The CPB release which described their project was an inventory of college credit courses. The project

*Education Department, Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA 19426, USA

director is a dean of telecourse design. This seems reasonable enough if you view the university as only a provider of courses. Television replaces the standard lecture format of the physically present teacher; the number of students is vastly increased (theoretically); and the lecture can be taped for replay.

But colleges offer many services: (1) counseling; (2) assessment (preassessment for potential and interest; postassessment to evaluate learning); (3) providing courses; (4) credentialling (awarding a degree, license, certificate); (5) record-keeping (providing a permanent location for validation of credentials and courses).

Everyone is talking about the third element—providing courses. But what of the other services offered by tertiary education? Why not employ telecommunications technology for these as well?

(1) Counseling can include such things as a discussion of whether one should continue formal schooling, and where; of the "empty nest syndrome;" of school as a way of filling that void; of dealing with poor self-image and math anxiety.

(2) Assessment (either before or after a program) can be similar to what commercial broadcasting has done with a recent geographical knowledge test and with the earlier National Defensive Driving Test—a normed, multiple-choice test with answer sheets provided by newspapers.

(3) Providing courses has many champions, yet not enough faculty give credit for such work, or treat seriously the potential use of commercial television. This view is perhaps supported by public television's reference to itself as "educational," implying that commercial TV does not educate.

(4) Credentialling, despite some attempts in the United Kingdom and the USA, probably will never be an important function of educational television. The authority to award degrees is jealously guarded; there are state regulations preventing, discouraging, and controlling such commerce; and it is not really needed by those who provide all the other services. It is useful to have this authority; it makes for autonomy and flexibility; it means that every creative idea need not pass the inspection of sometimes unimaginative minds. But it is not necessary, so long as someone else can grant the credit.

Indeed, the strongest argument for having faculty participate in poetry readings or symposia is not necessarily because they are proficient, but because, if they buy into the program, if they become performers, they may give credit for the course. But they should be used sparingly, lest we deter students from watching some witty Restoration comedy by first forcing them to listen to a ponderous faculty explication.

(5) Record-keeping (though confidentiality restrictions and security controls are needed) can also be a way for telecommunications to help the adult learner. Centralized credit banks, accessed by video or computer terminals, with transcripts transmitted by FAX machines, seem

a sensible alternative to maintaining Dickensian file cabinets in forgotten Old Mains, or to duplicating expensive automated systems (sometimes literally across the road from one another).

SUMMARY

Higher education and telecommunications can meet needs by working together, but their vision of what to provide should be considerably expanded. A good beginning would be for policy makers to address things other than course development. The educators and the broadcasters should schedule such topics at their annual meetings. Conferences like this one are efficient mechanisms for such exchange.

Television, at this point in time, is the pursuer, and education the pursued. Consequently, broadcasters' conventions are much more likely to treat something called "educational services" than are university people to treat television as a serious medium. The latter's training, after all, is in print. (Though with declining enrollments strengthening the appeal of continuing education and distance learning, television may soon be the pursued.)

It would be a forceful appeal to say to the universities that unless they use television more wisely and provide more services to broader groups, they will go out of business. But such an argument would probably not be true, at least in the case of the so-called "highly selective" places or those with specialized programs. In any case, no one wants academic people to get into broadcasting because they see it as the main chance, or as an interesting funding angle. Ideally, they should use television not as an end but as a means: someone needs a service who cannot be reached except by television, or who would learn more effectively without print. They should use television, not because it is trendy, but because it is needed.

How do we accomplish this? It is consciousness-raising for the most part, so our public utterances should repeat the theme that the university is more than courses. Our public are not simply students, but clients, our performers not just lecturers, but counselors. If we keep shouting that message, it may get through.

(1) L. L. Kruhly, Pub Telecomm Rev, VI, 18 (1978).

(2) These points were first raised tentatively in D. V. O'Brien, "Scenes from a Marriage," Pub Telecomm Rev, VII, 47-48 (1979).